

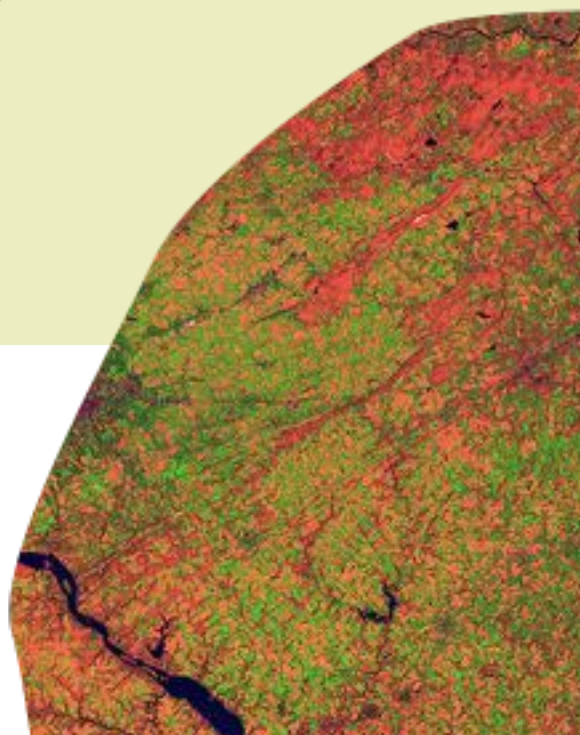
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FORMAS



# Preserving Traditions, Growing Sustainability: “Šilainiai Gardens”

## Urban Gardening Initiative in Kaunas, Lithuania

*Monika Didžiulytė*



*“September in Šilainiai Gardens” by Vytautas Paplauskas (2022), URL: <https://www.facebook.com/silainiusodai/photos/pb.100064754194218.-2207520000./5883427801667742/?type=3>, used with permission from the initiative Šilainiai Gardens.*

**Where is this grassroots initiative implemented? Who are the promoters? Who are the beneficiaries?**

Šilainiai Gardens is a public urban garden located in the Šilainiai neighborhood of Kaunas, Lithuania. The Šilainiai neighborhood is a so-called "sleeping neighborhood," primarily consisting of residential apartment buildings. It is home to approximately 50,000 residents, mainly senior individuals and families with children. Established in 2018, the Šilainiai Gardens project aims to preserve and continue the traditions and practices of the local community, which has been actively involved in gardening and greening the area since the interwar period.

Currently, the project is supported by the Lithuanian Culture Council, Kaunas city municipality and a public enterprise called the Kaunas Fort Park. The Šilainai Gardens is managed and supervised by Evelina Šimkutė - garden's project coordinator.

**How does this initiative engage with climate? Does it tackle mitigation, adaptation, both or other dimensions of climate change?**

The Šilainai Gardens project is contributing to both mitigation and adaptation efforts. The project's vision identified its benefits for people and the city. City utilities, city assets, and sustainability are particularly relevant in this context. The document argues that composting eliminates organic waste, significantly reduces the need for packaging, alleviates pressure on waste collection and transportation, and decreases illegal dumping. Additionally, the project as a whole contributes to sustainability by reducing the *heat island effect*, slowing down water flow to increase infiltration, rehabilitating the soil, and enhancing resilience in the food system. Importantly, the document aligns with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the UN (Šimkutė et al., 2018).

More specifically, the garden managers prioritize environmentally conscious practices and organize lectures and educational activities to teach responsible and effective gardening methods that minimize harm to the surrounding ecosystem. For example, lectures on non-chemical methods of pest control, such as dealing with slugs, have been provided. Additionally, participants and attendees are encouraged to use reusable containers and be mindful of their environmental impact during events (Šilainių Sodai, n.d.).

Furthermore, Šilainai Gardens serves as an educational and resilience-building space. Various lectures are held, covering topics such as permaculture and biomimicry, which introduce participants to sustainable and nature-inspired solutions for urban gardening. The project also regularly organizes tidy-up days, contributing to the protection of the environment and the preservation of the area's natural beauty (Šilainių Sodai, n.d.). Ultimately, Šilainai Gardens cultivates resilience, a sense of

community, sustainable cohabitation practices, and offers an alternative to more harmful food production practices.

### **What are the main objectives? What are the main values?**

The values of the Šilainiai Gardens project encompass the preservation of traditional practices and knowledge, sustainable social and agricultural practices, sustainable cohabitation of people with flora and fauna, biodiversity, resilience, and more.

The primary goal of the project has always been to meet the demand of urbanites for gardening spaces. The area's residents, particularly senior citizens, have already utilized areas for gardening purposes and have greened the neighborhood by planting trees and bushes, enhancing the aesthetics in the Soviet-style modern architecture in the area. The project has provided the community with a space where they can practice traditional, sustainable, and safe gardening, while also fostering a sense of community and cultivating resilience among its members (Šimkutė et al., 2018).

The initiative's coordinator, E. Šimkutė, emphasizes the importance of harmony between nature, humans, and heritage. By involving artists and scholars, the project has facilitated learning about the ecosystem itself and sustainable solutions for effective and safe gardening practices. The community has discovered over 300 different species, and through sustainable gardening and tending to the green areas, the space has become friendly and inviting to animals and birds, including foxes, newts, frogs, thrushes, blackbirds, nightingales, and bees. When working in the gardens, consideration is given to the cycles of birds, bees, dragonflies, and butterflies, and efforts are made to disturb them as little as possible (Javaitytė, 2022).

Coordinator Šimkutė also highlights the importance of preserving traditional knowledge. The garden serves as a space to share and pass on the knowledge about growing food. Senior gardeners, particularly those with rural backgrounds, play a significant role as natural educators, frequently assisting urbanites with their crops and stepping in to help rectify mistakes (Javaitytė, 2022). This involvement of senior citizens is particularly significant because Soviet-style apartment building areas are predominantly occupied by them (Burneika, Ubarevičienė & Baranuskaitė 2019).





*Image 2: A photo of a bee in Šilainiai Gardens by Vytautas Paplauskas (2021) <https://www.facebook.com/silainiusodai/photos/pb.100064754194218.-2207520000./4500489259961610/?type=3>, used with permission from the initiative Šilainiai Gardens.*

Senior citizens involved in the project share that gardening is now their primary activity since retiring. The project provides them with a safe and natural space for engaging in pleasant physical activity and relaxation. It offers easy access to nature,

allowing them to enjoy its tranquility, grow their own crops, and harvest fruits, vegetables, berries, and greens. Many of these residents have been gardening since their childhood or youth. Hence, working outdoors, enjoying the fresh air and growing food themselves is important to their lifestyle and identity (Šimkutė, n.d. -a).

Finally, the garden values community. The coordinator emphasizes that the garden is first and foremost an informal community engaged in shared activities. The community consists of over 100 people, and their plots range from 1 square meter in raised beds to larger traditional plots. It not only aims to bring neighborhood residents together but also encourages and welcomes anyone interested to participate continuously or as a guest. The place is open for visitors to take harvest from shared farming beds with community signs, indicating that anyone can come and water the plants or taste the produce (Krapavickaitė, 2021).



*Image 3: "June in the educational beds of Šilainiai Gardens" by Vytautas Paplauskas (2021)*

*<https://www.facebook.com/silainiusodai/photos/pb.100064754194218.-2207520000./4361511580526046/?type=3>, used with permission from the initiative Šilainiai Gardens.*

### **What is the timeline? Are there already visible effects?**

The Šilainiai Gardens project has its roots in the interwar period when residents first began engaging in gardening activities in the area. The project is situated within the Kaunas Fortress, which was originally constructed to protect the Russian Empire's western borders. Like many military and imperial heritage sites, it carries a controversial and often negative historical and social meaning. Despite this, locals managed to repurpose the area after World War I, utilizing the tunnels as natural refrigerators for storing and preserving their harvests (Šimkutė et al., 2018).

In 1984, the Šilainiai neighborhood was established, and apartment buildings were constructed. Many residents of the newly built neighborhoods, originating from rural areas, continued gardening activities in the area. The newcomers took the initiative to clean the run-down and overgrown territory of the VIII fort, which was covered in bushes and infested with Sosnowsky's hogweed. They planted trees and plants, creating a community garden that, by 1999, was already well-established (Šimkutė et al., 2018; Krapavickaitė, 2021).





*Image 4: "Spring in Šilainiai Gardens" by Vytautas Paplauskas (2021)*

*<https://www.facebook.com/silainiusodai/photos/pb.100064754194218.-2207520000./4239055472771658/?type=3>, used with permission from the initiative Šilainiai Gardens.*

In more recent years, as many original residents of the neighborhood entered retirement, gardening has become one of their main activities. However, there has also been a rise in robberies and instances of destruction. These incidents have led to heightened levels of physical and perceived insecurity, resulting in a demand for increased supervision and administration of the area. Formalizing activities through the Šilainiai Gardens project has played a crucial role in providing a safe environment for senior residents to continue their traditional practices (Šimkutė et al., 2018).

In 2018, a transformative project was initiated by the residents and volunteers, with the support of various partners. The project aimed to revitalize the area and promote sustainable gardening practices. The Kaunas Fort Park enterprise provided the land for this initiative, creating a dedicated space for the Šilainiai Gardens project to flourish (Šilainiai Project, 2019). The project has also been supported financially by the Lithuanian Culture Council. The Council provides funding for materials and tools necessary for enabling educational communal activities, which include clean-up



events, workshops, lectures with naturalists and gardening experts, seed exchanges, grass mowing and more (Šilainių Sodai, n.d.). From 2020, the project has also received support from the "Initiatives for Kaunas" program of the Kaunas municipality (Krapavickaitė, 2021).

Since the inception of the project, Šilainiai Gardens have grown into a thriving community-driven endeavor, attracting over 100 members and fostering a sense of togetherness among the residents. The community holds gardening meetings every Wednesday from 18:00 to 20:00, organizes clean-up events on weekends, and hosts workshops on Sundays (Krapavickaitė, 2021).



*Image 5: A photo of participants involved in the outdoors furniture making workshop by Vytautas Paplauskas (2020),*

*<https://www.facebook.com/silainiusodai/photos/pb.100064754194218.-2207520000./3440968382580375/?type=3>, used with permission from the initiative Šilainiai Gardens.*

### **Who are the actors involved? What are their backgrounds?**

Evelina Šimkutė is an artist and cultural producer who specializes in socially engaged art and creative place-making practices. She graduated from the Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in 2012 and is currently based in Lithuania. Since 2015, Evelina has been leading the 'Šilainiai Project,' a creative platform in the Šilainiai housing estate in Kaunas. Evelina is a coordinator and an active initiator of the Šilainiai Urban Gardens initiative, focusing on long-term strategies for a sustainable city and community development in the neighborhood. E. Šimkutė is an actor organizer and participant of all the events, whose genuine and active involvement in the community is evident. Evelina is active on social media communicating and sharing events and achievements of the community (Šimkutė n.d. -b).

### **Are any shortcomings or critical points visible? What other problematic issues can arise from its implementation?**

It is difficult to critically evaluate the implementation of the project. It would perhaps require comprehensive research, such as an anthropological study or a survey of participants and neighbors. However, from an amateur outsider's perspective, the project seems to have proven itself as a long-term, needed, effective, and practical initiative. I would attribute its success to the project managers and initiators drawing from the community's traditional practices, which were already in place and are now supported and amplified through the project's more formal structure and funding.

### **How would it be potentially replicable in other settings?**

Considering the significance of multiapartment buildings in Lithuanian architecture and their predominant occupancy by individuals often as old as the buildings themselves, it is reasonable to assume that this initiative could be replicated throughout the country. Considering that over 60% of Lithuanians reside in multiapartment buildings, with more than 70% of these buildings constructed before 1991, it is evident that many neighborhoods share similar characteristics with Šilainiai

in terms of architecture, urban planning, and sociodemographics (fi-compass, n.d.; Renonbill, n.d.; ). These neighborhoods and their elderly residents could benefit from access to community and safe spaces promoting comfortable and active lifestyle essential for health and well-being. Consequently, in Lithuania, the Šilainiai Urban Gardens model could prove effective in promoting resilience, and a certain level of autonomy among senior citizens. However, it's worth noting that some neighborhoods may not have access to land resources similar to what Šilainiai Gardens in Kaunas Fort Park offers, which could be seen as a primary limitation.

### **Is this initiative conducive to broader changes? If yes, which?**

The Šilainiai Gardens initiative can be considered conducive to broader changes and has the potential to impact various aspects of the community and its surroundings. The support and recognition from the city municipality, as well as the involvement of diverse non-governmental social enterprises, highlight the effectiveness, visibility, and versatility of the project.

In terms of broader changes, the initiative promotes social and environmental sustainability. By preserving traditional practices and knowledge, fostering sustainable social and agricultural practices, and promoting the cohabitation of people with flora and fauna, the Šilainiai Gardens project contributes to a more sustainable way of living. It encourages sustainable gardening practices, the use of non-chemical methods for pest control, and the cultivation of biodiversity, all of which have positive effects on the environment.

Additionally, the project promotes community preparedness and resilience. Through its emphasis on community engagement, shared activities, and the involvement of senior citizens with rural backgrounds, the initiative strengthens the sense of community and cultivates resilience among its members. The gardens provide a safe and natural space for physical activity, relaxation, and the sharing of traditional knowledge. By involving educators and naturalists, the project also promotes learning and encourages the passing on of knowledge to younger generations.



Institutionally, the support from the city municipality and the involvement of social enterprises indicate recognition of the importance of community-driven initiatives and the value they bring to the neighborhood. This recognition could lead to the developing of more supportive policies and institutional arrangements that encourage and facilitate similar grassroots projects in the future. The project's success and its positive impact on the community's well-being could inspire other neighborhoods or cities to adopt similar initiatives, further contributing to long-term sustainability and community preparedness.

In that regard, it is important to note that the Šilainiai Gardens initiative drew on experiences of overseas urban gardens. The project vision initiators overviewed Battery Urban Farm in NY (US), Lasnaidee Laagna Garden in Tallinn, and Aleksandri Community Garden in Tartu (Estonia) (Šimkutė et al., 2018). Moreover, representatives from Lasnaidee Garden visited Šilainiai Gardens, sharing their success stories and holding a workshop. The Furniture workshop, in particular, was an activity adapted from the Estonian friends (Javaitytė, 2022). This indicates cohesion among urban projects and the potential for the diffusion of these models.

Overall, the Šilainiai Gardens initiative goes beyond its immediate impact on gardening and community engagement. It has the potential to catalyze broader changes in terms of social, environmental, and institutional aspects, fostering a more sustainable, resilient, and prepared community.

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